

Row breaks out over paying for artificial nutrition in Germany

A row has broken out in Germany over who should pay for patients to receive artificial feeding. The joint doctors and health industry committee that determines which treatments will be funded by the insurance industry claims that artificial feeding is being used unnecessarily in patients who could be fed orally if staff in nursing homes were willing to do so. It has issued new rules saying that the treatment should be used only in restricted circumstances.

But the German government, reacting to an outcry in the media about difficult cases, has refused to accept the committee's ruling and says that the insurance industry should continue to fund the procedure for the vast majority of cases.

Consequently, the committee—the Joint Federal Committee of the German Health System (Gemeinsamer Bundesausschuss)—has threatened the government with legal action. The committee comprises representatives from the national associations of doctors and dentists, the German Hospital Federation, and the health insurance schemes.

Annette Tuffs *Heidelberg*

Many US doctors do not want to share performance data with patients

Most US doctors do not use quality improvement techniques that provide information about their practice, the first national survey of US doctors has found (*Health Affairs* 2005;24:843-53). Nor do they use techniques which show how well they perform. And if they are provided with information about their performance by insurance companies or health plans, many do not want to share that information with their patients.

The Commonwealth Fund, a non-profit making foundation

focusing on health, surveyed 3598 US doctors in 2003. A total of 1837 (53%) responded.

Doctors were reluctant to share data about how well they performed. Three quarters of doctors felt that performance data should be shared with medical leadership of their health systems and hospitals. But only 55% felt that such data should be shared with their patients.

Janice Hopkins Tanne *New York*

The study is at www.cmwf.org.

Medical journals are corrupted by dependence on drug companies

Medical journals are no more than “an extension of the marketing arm of pharmaceutical companies” because a large proportion of their revenue comes from drug advertisements and reprints of company funded trials, claims former *BMJ* editor, Richard Smith.

Dr Smith argues that although medical journals make a sizeable income from drug advertisements this is the least of their “corrupting form of dependence” on the industry since the advertisements are “there for all to see and criticize” (*PLoS Medicine* 2005;2:e138; www.plosmedicine.org, doi: 10.1371/journal.pmed.0020138).

Dr Smith's strongest criticism is levelled at the fact that journals publish clinical trials that are funded by the industry. Unlike advertisements, trials are seen by readers as the highest form of evidence, he says.

The potential profits from reprints of such a trial can run to \$1m (£0.5m; €0.8m), says Dr Smith. And it is this potential income that can have the biggest corrupting influence on a journal.

Commenting on the article, Fiona Godlee, editor of the *BMJ* said, “The *BMJ* takes the issues of transparency and accountability very seriously. We continue to call for public registration of all clinical trials and full disclosure of results, regardless of outcome.”

Zosia Kmietowicz *London*

WHO admits to “blundering around” in fight against avian flu

Jane Parry *Hong Kong*

The World Health Organization has denied reports published online in the journal *Nature* that it is being thwarted in its attempts to combat avian flu by a lack of cooperation from the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO; www.nature.com/news/2005/050509/full/435131a.html).

The article claimed that WHO had not received any data on isolates from infected poultry from the organisation for the past eight months and quoted a WHO official as saying that the FAO had not been sharing the information it had.

Peter Cordingley, WHO's spokesman in Manila, said, “It is true that we have not received any data from infected poultry isolates but only because the FAO itself has not received any samples, but the comment that they have not been sharing the data they do have is a result of a miscommunication with the reporter,” said Mr Cordingley.

“This is the first time that the FAO, World Organization for Animal Health, and WHO have had to work together on an international crisis of this scale. There was a lot of blundering around at first, and we are still feeling our way but the situation is a lot better now than it was in the early days,” said Mr Cordingley.

Mr Cordingley also said that claims in the journal that WHO had received only six samples from the 44 cases of H5N1 avian

flu infection since December last year were misleading. “Since December 2004, Vietnam has provided well over 100 human clinical samples, including 13 in the past month, and those samples have gone to the laboratories within the WHO Collaborating Centre Network,” said Mr Cordingley. “Of the specimens that have gone out, the laboratories were only able to draw a handful of virus isolates. We have the data from those samples,” he said.

“The question is, why has it been so difficult to get samples of the virus? We don't know, but most of the samples were from northern Vietnam, where there have been cases of light and asymptomatic infection and we think the viral load in samples from those cases may have been very low,” he said.

WHO would still like to receive more epidemiological data on the outbreaks, however. “We need to have more of the nitty gritty data to determine whether or not we are moving towards a pandemic,” said Mr Cordingley.

Since December 2004, of the 44 confirmed human cases of H5N1 avian flu in Vietnam 16 have been fatal. The Vietnamese authorities reported a new case of human infection on 13 May, in a 55 year old man.

Declan Butler, who wrote the news article for *Nature*, said that he stood by his story. □



Cao The Hai, aged 55, the latest person to contract avian flu, sits in an isolation ward in Hanoi, Vietnam